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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BRUSSELS 000070

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [CG](#) [RW](#) [BY](#) [BE](#)

SUBJECT: BELGIUM:CENTRAL AFRICA, ESPECIALLY THE DRC, IS
BELGIUM'S MAIN FOREIGN ASSISTANCE PRIORITY

REF: A. 09 BRUSSELS 1581

[1](#)B. 09 BRUSSELS 1425

[1](#)C. 09 BRUSSELS 1315

Classified By: Ambassador Howard Gutman for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Foreign Minister's Vanackere's week long trip to Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi from January 18 to 25, underscores the importance of Central Africa to Belgium. For the Belgian political class and the media, Central Africa, especially the Congo, is the chief foreign policy concern. All three former colonies are partner countries for foreign assistance that sign agreements with the GOB and receive Belgian Technical Assistance personnel in country; the Congo received 7.6 percent of total Belgian aid in 2006. Belgium has signed a new partnership agreement with Burundi that provides an incentive for improved political governance in the form of additional aid and is working on a similar agreement with the Congo. The Development Minister's Chief of Staff recently told the Ambassador that Afghanistan could not become a partner country because of the weak governance capacity of the GoA and the security situation. He added that aid could still be increased to non-partner countries. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) FM Vanackere will make his first official trip to Central Africa as Foreign Minister January 18 to 25. According to Congo Desk Officer, Hugues Chantry, FM Vanackere will meet all the key players. He will be visiting: Kinshasa (January 18-20), Goma January 20-21, Gisenyi and Kigali, Rwanda January 22-23, and then Bujumbura January 24-25. The length of the trip underscores the importance of Central Africa, especially the DRC, in Belgian foreign policy. During his weekly address to Parliament on January 12, FM Vanackere said he wanted to ensure that the renewed friendship between Belgium and the DRC would stay on track, prior to the June 2010 Commemoration of Congolese Independence from Belgium, to which the GOB has been invited to participate.

DRC Is Central

[1](#)3. (C) Belgian political, economic, human rights, and foreign aid policy towards its former colonies in Central Africa (the DRC, Rwanda, and Burundi) are regularly debated in the media. The Foreign Minister is often questioned more on specifics of Central African foreign and assistance policy by Parliament than any other region. Former Foreign Minister De Gucht was strongly criticized for his blunt statement in April 2008 criticizing the DRC government, which led to a

suspension of diplomatic ties between the DRC and Belgium for almost eight months. The politically influential francophone Liberal (MR) Michel family has long taken a political interest in DRC policy. Former FM and later EU Commissioner for Development Louis Michel (see ref A) was one of De Gucht's strongest critics. His son Charles Michel is now Minister of Behn. Even a politician@re Democratic Humanist (Cdinister of Employment and r in her official biohonate about Africa." nce to its former colons Belgium's main aid priority. Belgium recently completed a new assistance agreement with the government of Burun\$i (ref c) that will increase guaranteed aid from EUR 40 million to EUR 50 million per year forfour years and add a 50 million incentive forcertain political improvements--a successful Qlection in 2010. Belgium is planning a new agreement of EUR 75 million per year (EUR 300 mllion over four years) with the DRC. This ageement will also include an incentive: EUR 10 million the last two years (EUR 50 million Qn 2013 and 2014) if the DRC holds a successful election in 2011 and meets certain political and macroeconomic governance benchmarks. TheDRC has been the largest recipient by far of Belgian aid for some time; in 2008, the GOB provided EUR 122 million or 7.6 percent of Belgium's global assistance to the DRC, a decrease from 11.2 percent in 2006. The DRC, Burundi, and Rwanda are among the eighteen priority countries for Belgian aid. Priority

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countries must sign agreements that include the creation of a bilateral commission to work together to identify and cooperate on priority projects. Belgian Technical assistance has Belgian administrators on the ground in such partner countries.

Afghanistan

15. (C) Development Minister Michel's Chief of Staff Bruno Van der Pluijm recently cautioned the Ambassador and A/DCM at a luncheon on Belgium's Africa policy (ref B), that requests to make Afghanistan a priority country for Belgian assistance were not possible and were counterproductive. Van der Pluijm said establishing a bilateral commission was not plausible between Belgium and Afghanistan considering the weak governing capacity of the Afghan government. He also cited the security situation as obviating the possibility of sending Belgian Aid technical experts to Afghanistan. On the positive side, he noted Belgium's doubling of aid to Afghanistan from EUR 6 million to EUR 12 million, and explained that this money would be distributed through the UN and NGOs rather than administered directly by Belgium. Finally, he pointed out that some partner countries receive substantially less assistance than Afghanistan, underscoring the possibility of increasing aid to non-partner countries. (Note: Ministry of Development statistics differ. Algeria is the only partner country that receives less than Afghanistan by a marginal amount. End Note.) He added that further requests to make Afghanistan a partner country would only cause frustration within Belgian Technical Cooperation and undermine the U.S. argument.

16. (C) Comment: Aid to the nations of Central Africa is and will remain Belgium's main assistance priority. The United States should remain cognizant of this fact when we ask for increased assistance to U.S. aid priorities, such as Afghanistan. Requests to treat U.S. priorities on the same footing as Belgium's traditional and current priorities will meet resistance. We should stress the new importance the Obama Administration and Secretary Clinton place on working together with Belgium in Central Africa. At the same time, we can remind Belgium that Afghanistan is a NATO priority that requires special attention.

GUTMAN

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